

OCT 19 1958

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Now, Total Control

Communes for China's Peasants

By WALTER BRIGGS

The borders of war in the Formosa Strait, the muffled news abroad of the most revolutionary step taken by the Chinese Communists since they swept into power nine years ago.

By the end of this month, Red China's 600,000,000 peasants will own almost nothing except the tattered blue clothing that covers their shabby bodies.

Dedicated Communist Party workers are herding them into "communes," which Chairman Mao Tse-tung, their creator, recently described as "a completely new basic unit of society."

Most of China's peasants had been collectivized for at least a couple of years. From now on, what they produce no longer will belong to the collectives—which are passing out of existence—but to the state itself. The individual and the state are to be one. The last ounce of freedom is being wrung out of the people, the ultimate measure of control exerted over them.

Even Communal Chopsticks

By the end of September, only ten weeks after the Communists put full steam on the campaign, 90.6 per cent of all peasant households had been communalized. Peiping Radio reported the same day. Communalization of tribal areas in such faraway provinces as Kanas and Yunnan is to be completed within a few weeks, the radio boasted.

In the great cities, the Party cadres are proceeding only a little slower, with all inhabitants to be dragged into neighborhood and factory communes within a year.

What the communes are coming to mean in the regime's cherished "masses" is spelled at the dining table. Hereafter, all Chinese will eat all their meals in messhalls; they will own not even a pair of chopsticks. They will pay in ration coupons, issued on the basis of how much labor each has contributed to the state.

A communal diet thus is becoming part of a controlled life. What more bitter blow to a people knows the world?

What stirred Mr. Mao to foment this new revolution?

Two years ago, it may be recalled, the Chinese leader invited his people to "let a hundred flowers of thought bloom." Unwittingly, many took him at his word. The chairman soon learned who were the "flowers," the most dangerous enemies of the regime among them. An ensuing "thought remolding campaign" further strengthened the Party's grip on the populace.

During the better part of the past year, Mr. Mao has been testing the resistance of the people to what he felt the regime and mulling over what could be done about it. The commune scheme was born in his mind, observers of the Chinese scene believe, out of an increasing sense of desperation and need.

One Up on the Soviets

There "long had" been "tension" of grain between harvest and need, and to forestall the possibility of hiding and eating too much of it, the regime's chief source of food capital—to acquire more of the spawning of the commune, the industrialization into modern nationhood.

the people would have to eat even less.

Controls embodied in communalization would give the state a firmer grasp on all that the peasants produced.

The theory Mr. Mao worked out would assure anew his reputation as a master Communist planner. The Soviet Russians themselves had failed in an effort years ago to push through their "enrogorod" system of farm cities. Mr. Mao's communes, even more embracing, would go the Russians one better. Ironically, their introduction has come at the very time when Premier Nikita Khrushchev is tightening farm controls through the abandonment of the machine tractor stations.

The communes are being organized, the regime retorts, along military lines, under military discipline. Subdivisions of them are being designated as battalions and companies. Thus, it is broadcast, quickly can be converted into fighting units.

But most observers here doubt that their creation has any direct connection with the struggle in the Formosa Strait. Peiping propagandists would have the world believe that communalization is being achieved at joyous gatherings; drums and cymbals are sounded and fireworks explode to mark the opening of a new chapter in the peasant life.

How, indeed, can the peasants feel about this new chapter?

Let us go back to history. A big reason for the Chinese revolution in 1949 was their cry, "Land to the tiller!" The Chinese peasantry also found good earth as one of their people's rallied to the cause. They were then gratefully accepted land seized from the landlords. But then there was taken away from them even a patch of pittance of space in which to grow crops, chickens and a variety of vegetables—as collectivization was forced upon them. Five down strikes were some of the results. These were the first steps toward.

Now the peasants are to lose their private plots, and a personal privacy besides.

The collectives are being amalgamated into the communes. The communes are as big as counties, embracing more than 20,000 households. Under the Party's watchful eye, the commune is taking the place of local government. "Worker, peasant, trader, student and militiaman merge into one." All political, economic, cultural, social and military institutions are being reformed along communal lines.

What else has this meant in human terms? Children are being delivered to communal nurseries. Families will move into barracks as fast as they are built. Even graveyards are being communalized.

The New 'Wage Slaves'

Members of the commune will be assigned to the field or to local factories without regard to their wishes, becoming "wage slaves" in the most literal sense of the term which the Communists employ to indict capitalism. And all must work so that all may eat, however little it may be.

Besides glorifying communal living, the Communists justify the communes as a means of speeding the "great leap forward" in production of all kinds. It will bring new efficiency to human

'Hell' in China

The reports in these columns year after year on what is now happening in Communist China and repercussions in the Communist bloc. A Chinese, educated in this country, but who had to the mainland and then gone to reports, "The whole country is in a sufferings of the people. It is hell."

Our Warsaw correspondent reports that European Communists have been studying the Chinese communes, a system of social organization which is regimenting and military Chinese people with a tightness and severity has no modern precedent. Peiping is now this system of social organization as a runner of full, perfect communism, but not what the Eastern Europeans had communism was going to be like. A writer has perhaps characterized the communes best by describing them as a combination of Stalinism and feudalism, a prescription for Utopia.

During the past two months there mounting evidence that disquiet about going on in China exists not only in Europe, but also in the highest circles in Moscow. No other explanation will suffice for that the Soviet press has kept its readers wholly in the dark as to the nature of the communes and Peiping's claims that communes are the road to communism. One problem for Moscow is the fact that Peiping's present ideological position is that China, not Russia, is now leading "socialist camp's progress to full communism."

There is still another aspect of the matter the Communists in Moscow and Eastern Europe to consider. The tremendous exertions extorted from the Chinese people are demanded for the purpose of increasing Communist China's military-economic strength as rapidly as possible. It must be assumed that work of China's more than half billion even done under the lash, will be productive. Communist China's military-economic will grow, perhaps even grow rapidly, militarily strong China, with a powerful industry, be satisfied with the present distribution of land and other resources between its own vast population and smaller population in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe? There would seem to be to think about in these developments, for us, but also for those who make Warsaw, Prague, Bucharest, Budapest, and Moscow.

Many observers believe that the Communists, in the economic sphere, already had killed off more than they could save. Despite some farm and industrial advances, production increase has failed to keep pace with a birthrate burgeoning the population at some 11,000,000 a year. Mr. Mao, well aware of this, doubtless had it in mind when formulating his communal theory.

The communes probably will be the supreme test of Mr. Mao's ability at planning and administration, he may succeed in making them stick, but only at the cost of great suffering.